DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 411 249 TM 027 159

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TITLE	"Becoming" through the Research Experience: The Quotidian Tensions of Social Transformation.
PUB DATE	1997-03-00
NOTE	8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Research; *Labeling (of Persons); *Learning Experience; *Life Events; Models; *Research Methodology; *Researchers; Social Change; Stereotypes
IDENTIFIERS	Researcher Role; Researcher Subject Relationship

ABSTRACT

The importance of personal experiences of a researcher that are "outside" of the research domain in dealing with the researcher's object of study is explored. It is equally true that research questions can also affect how one understands or experiences topical issues in a later personal experience. The researcher's personal experience dealing with a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder became a factor in her reaction to the suggestion that she herself was dyslexic. Reflecting on the labeling of people with "deficit" conditions resulted in increased understanding of her own situation and an altered perception of research objects. No matter how hard the researcher tries to be objective, he or she cannot escape the personal components of the interpretive framework being applied. Research is furthered when those personal constructions are acknowledged and examined. The dialectic between research and researcher cannot be ignored. (Contains 17 references.) (SLD)

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"Becoming" Through the Research Experience: The Quotidian Tensions of Social Transformation

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TM027159

This paper is prepared for the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in Chicago, IL

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"Becoming" Through the Research Experience: The Quotidian Tensions of Social Transformation

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Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association, Chicago, IL, March 25, 1997

As a graduate student in the field of anthropology, I come from a discipline that many view as being somewhat obsessed with questions about the research-researcher dialectic. But putting the researcher more squarely in the research, or what has been deemed the "reflexive turn" in anthropology (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Behar & Gordon 1995), has proved to be essential for a field whose methods are predominantly interpretive, for if knowledge, like culture itself, is produced dialogically (Bakhtin 1981; Mannheim & Tedlock 1995), how can we speak about our research findings without revealing how powerfully the researcher is present in what it is we have come to know?

Today I want to specifically address the place of a researcher's personal experiences that are seemingly "outside" of the research domain, for grappling with politically and emotionally charged social dynamics that are one's "object" of study. In a core course during my first year of graduate studies, we read an incredibly moving chapter by Renato Rosaldo (1989), a prominent theorist in the field of anthropology. Rosaldo had long done research among the Ilongot on headhunting. Yet, he found that no matter what metaphors of anger he used to understand the need to headhunt following a death, he simply could not grasp the obviousness of the relationship as it was experienced for Ilongot men. It was not until the death of his wife Michelle that he felt he could fathom some of the visceralness of the rage Ilongot men had been describing to him. It was also the first time he more fully grasped their claims about the insufficient replacement of Christian processes of bereavement following the ban of headhunting by the Philippine state.

I offer this brief glimpse of Rosaldo's story because it demonstrates how one's research questions can affect how one understands or experiences those topical issues in a later personal experience. We also see how this intimate moment is then brought back to the research topic itself.

Exemplifying Hegel's (1977/1807) phenomenological understanding of the process of "Becoming," this powerful demonstration of the research-researcher dialectic struck me as particularly profound during a recent reread. I had just gone through a much less extreme, but somewhat comparable experience.

While working at a summer camp just before entering graduate school, I had a twelve-year old camper whom I'll call Jill. She was diagnosed as having Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and her reputation as a problem camper preceded her each summer before her counselors had gotten to now her. Her attention-getting outbursts were understood by most of the staff as an obvious outcome of the fact that her parents took her off Ridalin during the summers to give her body a rest. Yet, the punishments for acting up, as well as the location where blame was often placed, was on Jill herself. She was denied attendance at many events because she became disruptive for the group when she couldn't "control" herself. As I got to know Jill during the two summers I was her group leader, I was given a window onto many of the complexities of her life, particularly interactions with her parents, teachers, and camp counselors who revealed to her in subtle, and often not so subtle ways, that she was often a burden to have around. With this new perspective on Jill's life, I began to notice circumstances in which Jill did not act up, such as when she was given *positive* attention. During such moments, she was no more out of control than any other kid her age away from home at summer camp.

Despite my constant struggle to create conditions under which Jill would not seem a "problem," the camp told Jill's parents that she could not come back the following summer because she required excessive counselor attention, and was still, at times, disruptive for some of the other kids. The camp knew that it was not in Jill's best interest, nor perhaps society's in the long run, but they had a lot of campers to be concerned about and were in a bind, for some campers threatened to not return the next summer. This moment of "defeat" was extraordinarily powerful for me. Placing drugs and blame in and on Jill, rather than offering more and different types of attention and social conditions in which she could "Become," in the Hegelian sense, seemed extraordinarily unfair for this bright young woman who was being tracked in problematic directions.

When I began graduate school, my frustration about what happened with Jill led me to mine feverishly through the literature on the role of categories in our society, particularly ones like ADHD which are latched onto biological processes. I became particularly smitten with Ian Hacking's (1995) Foucauldian-inspired work on what he calls the "looping effect of human kinds." There is a dialectical process when a human kind like ADHD is created, for rather than solely describing existing types of people, it also creates persons in it's image. As the people change, Hacking suggests, the category, in return, is also modified. This is like the process of tracking in the schools. I then found Raymond Williams' (1977) notion of "structures of feeling" a compelling idea for thinking through the role of emotions in the looping effects of ADHD in Jill's situation. He explains that seemingly epiphenomenal emotions are actually highly political sentiments that play an intimate part in hegemonic formations. But while early readings of these literatures helped analytically map out some of Jill's situation, I was still struggling with the specifics of how sentiments were participating in Hacking's dialectical understanding of the effects of categories, particularly in light of the specifics of Jill's situation.

Here I must return to Rosaldo. He says that throughout his research before Michelle's death, he often tried to invoke other death's he experienced in his life to get a handle on what the Ilongot had been describing. I, too, tried to unearth what I hoped would be somewhat comparable experiences in my life to better empathize with Jill when she spoke about her experiences of feeling misunderstood and denied participation in camp events with her friends, or when she sometimes blamed herself for her behavior, but at other times knew that it was not necessarily her fault. It was not until almost three years later that I felt I was able to get more inside of Jill's experience. Quite out of the blue during a professor's office hours, she told me that she thought I might be dyslexic.

As I struggled with this category being placed on me, which is also biologically-based yet highly political in it's placement on persons, I often thought about Jill. I, too, had come to doubt myself and my place in the world I was being trained to enter. Yet, I also knew, particularly through my thinking on Jill's struggles, that it was perhaps less my own personal problem, for I could not control it. Turning this dyslexic claim outward, trying to avoid the looping effect of this category, I thought about the schools I had been taught in, containing overcrowded classrooms with little time for

individual student focus. I also looked toward the contemporary state of writing in the discipline of anthropology, in which professors themselves often struggle with what feels like foreign forms and conditions in which to write out ideas. As my own experiences, full of bouts of anger, frustration, and even rage at institutional structures, persons, and ideologies, were filtered through my understandings of Jill's situation, many theoretical connections I had been unable to fully articulate, not to mention viscerally grasp, began to come together in often lucid spurts.

Through these experiences I was able to quite powerfully see that a critical reading of liberal ideology was a missing link for grappling with the relationship between sentiments and the power of categories in Jill's situation. Early critiques of liberalism, such as Nietzsche's (1982/1888), reveal that the very idea of individual "free will" enables those that do not act accordingly to be held responsible for their actions. It would seem to follow that those in Jill's position would not be the locus of blame since individual wills can not control many neurological processes. But, as Foucault's (1975) elaborations of Nietzsche's ideas reveal, liberal societies have other forms of power which tap into the fact that what are deemed "natural rights" (Locke 1980/1690) are actually rights granted to very specific types of persons (Macpherson 1962; Pateman 1988; Mehta 1990; Mohanty 1990; Williams 1991). Thus, in Jill's case, and as experienced through my own situation, this political paradox, or what Uday Mehta (1990) calls "liberal strategies of exclusion," makes it much easier in our liberal society to blame Jill for not being able to act "normal" like the other kids, than to go up against her parents, her schools, the psychological community, popular belief, and the liberal ideology itself (Connelly 1991). Hacking's "looping effect of human kinds," a process which can demarcate and help create persons that don't fit, works powerfully in tandem with blaming and thus self-doubting liberal sentiments. Jill probably does have the *biological* aspects of what we now call ADHD, but my own experience with a human kind category helped me see the tension a Foucauldian perspective reveals, for we may want to help kids fit into society, such as through drugs, but we also want to transform many aspects of our worlds. From a pragmatic perspective, what to do in the interim?

It ended up that I am not, in fact, dyslexic. But despite the false claim, I had to and still continue to deal with the residual effects of my potential category membership. It has been through

this often agonizing struggle that new pieces of the puzzle about Jill's situation continually come into view. And as the dialectic continued, such as through this past summer's relationships with other campers grappling with human kind labels, I once again returned to my university this fall, with new insights into my work, and even my own experiences. And as I head off this coming fall to do my dissertation research on the category of "slackers" and its intersection with the biologized category of "adolescence," this research-researcher dialectic continues.

There is a danger, though, in bringing ourselves more squarely into our discussions of our research. In anthropology there is a bit of a tug of war between those who want the self in, and others who fear that soon the anthropologist's self will be all that we know about. Rosaldo's piece offers some important reminders for us as we venture down this path. He notes that his own experiences, despite the profoundness of his wife's death, were still within many of his own cultural categories, and should in no way be seen as a direct representation of what an Ilongot man experiences. My situation, as well, is clearly different from Jill's in various ways. But Rosaldo's situation, and my own, were powerful moments in our understandings of the dynamics we are studying. This phenomenological perspective on the research encounter forces us to remember that no matter how hard we try, these seemingly "personal" moments are a part of our interpretative framework, for our research understandings, ourselves, and those with whom we are working are constantly "Becoming." We do our research questions a favor by putting these dynamics on the table for discussion and debate.

There is also a fear on the researcher's part, which Rosaldo's prominent position perhaps allows him to sidestep. Will you all remember me as Rachel Heiman, the anthropology graduate student you saw give a paper on how she was wrongly diagnosed as dyslexic? Or will I be, in your minds, Rachel Heiman, who does work on the looping effects of categories in a liberal state, who's revealing of personal experiences is being truer to the interpretative task in the production of knowledge? But I suppose such is the risk many of us up here must take. This dialogical process goes on anyway, so why should revealing it and discussing it make it our research findings, as well as who we are as researchers, any less?

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